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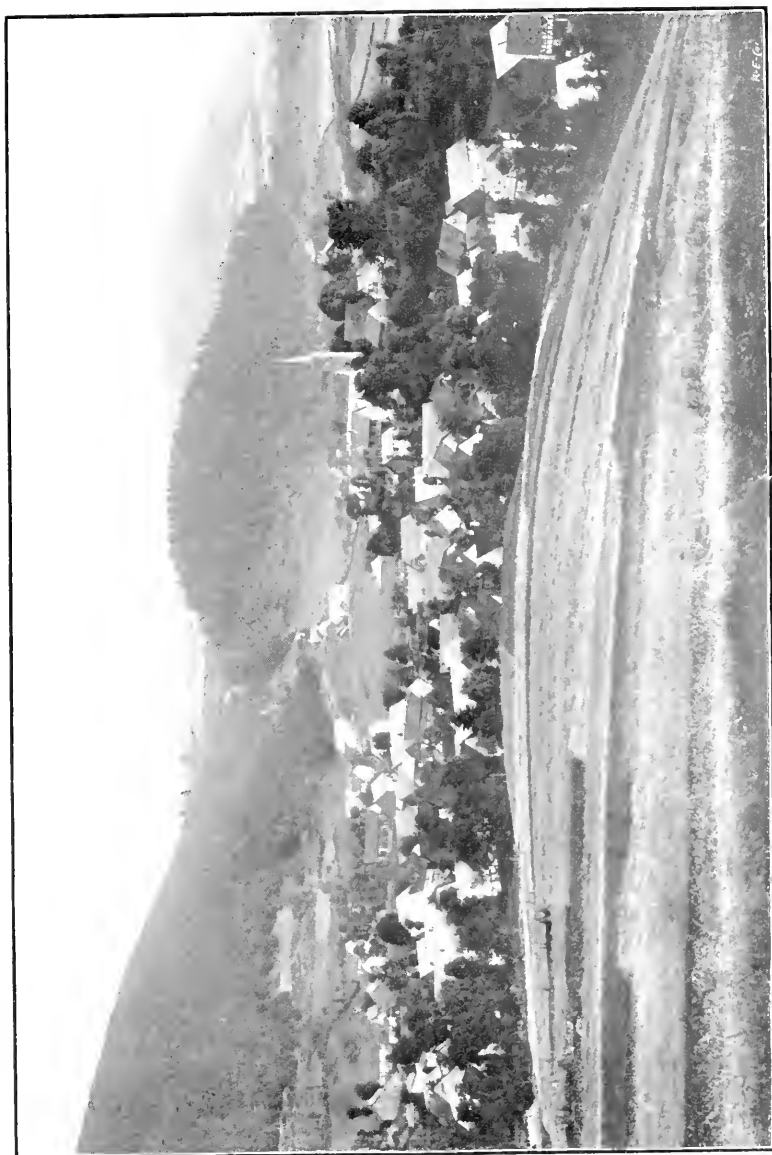
1907











ELSOFF.

THE

# Hiester Homestead

in Germany

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BERKS COUNTY  
BY REQUEST OF THE COUNCIL OF THE SOCIETY  
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BY  
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THE  
HIESTER HOMESTEAD  
IN GERMANY.

IN the early settlement of that part of Pennsylvania which is now included within the limits of Berks County a large portion of the population was drawn from those parts of Germany bordering on or near the river Rhine. A description of a neighborhood and homestead from which some of those persons emigrated therefore may be valuable because typical of others and thus having a personal interest for many of our people. Moreover, such a description may be useful in stimulating other persons to investigations like those which have proved so interesting in this case.

The Hiester family in America is descended from three brothers. John, the eldest, emigrated in 1732 and was followed in 1737 by Joseph and Daniel who sailed in that year in the ship *St. Andrew* from Rotterdam. The family records in Daniel Hiester's prayer book describe the three brothers as sons of John and Catharine Hiester and their birthplace as the village (dorf) of Elsoff in the county (graftschafft) of Wittgenstein, in the province of Westphalia.

Westphalia is one of the western provinces of Prussia near to but not bordering on nor traversed

by the Rhine and it is quite probable that the course of the emigrants was first to the Rhine and down that river to Rotterdam where they embarked for America. Wittgenstein is situated in the extreme southeastern corner of Westphalia adjoining the provinces of Hessen and Nassau and is on the high altitude of the slope of a picturesque chain of mountains called Rothhaargebirge which forms the watershed dividing the sources of the Lenne flowing westward into the Rhine from the sources of the Eder flowing eastward into the Weser. The ancient Schloss of Wittgenstein is in the southern part of the county in the suburbs of the town of Laasphe and was formerly the depository of the records of the county but the town of Berleburg further to the north and the seat of the prince of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Berleburg now has the records relating to that portion of the county in which Elsoff is situated.

The railroad connecting Marburg with Kreuzthal near Siegen on which only local trains and second, third, and fourth class cars are run connects at Erndtebruck with a branch road terminating at Raumland. From this point the traveler completes his journey to Berleburg in a mail coach of the familiar bright yellow color of the Kaiserliche Post with a coachman in regulation uniform who wears a high feather in his hat and who announces his approach to the waiting villagers by blowing a curved brass horn.

Berleburg, the capital of this part of the county, is a town of about 2000 inhabitants situated in the picturesque valley of the Eder. The most important feature of the place is the Schloss of the

prince of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Berleburg, built on high ground above the town. The Schloss was originally erected in 1585 as appears by the date on a stone bearing the family coat of arms placed over the entrance of the gateway of the outer walls and is imposing and extensive with numerous wings, towers and outbuildings. It contains a museum and a library of interesting and valuable manuscripts. It evidently has been frequently renovated and modernized and appears to be, as it doubtless is, the comfortable home of a cultivated and refined family whose presence in the Schloss is indicated in royal fashion by the floating of a flag over the central portion of the Schloss. The park immediately adjacent and belonging to the Schloss covers possibly thirty or forty acres and romantically descends to and crosses a little stream which feeds a lake within the grounds. The park is well wooded and tastefully embellished with shrubbery and flowers and is kept in excellent condition. It is open to the public during certain hours every day.

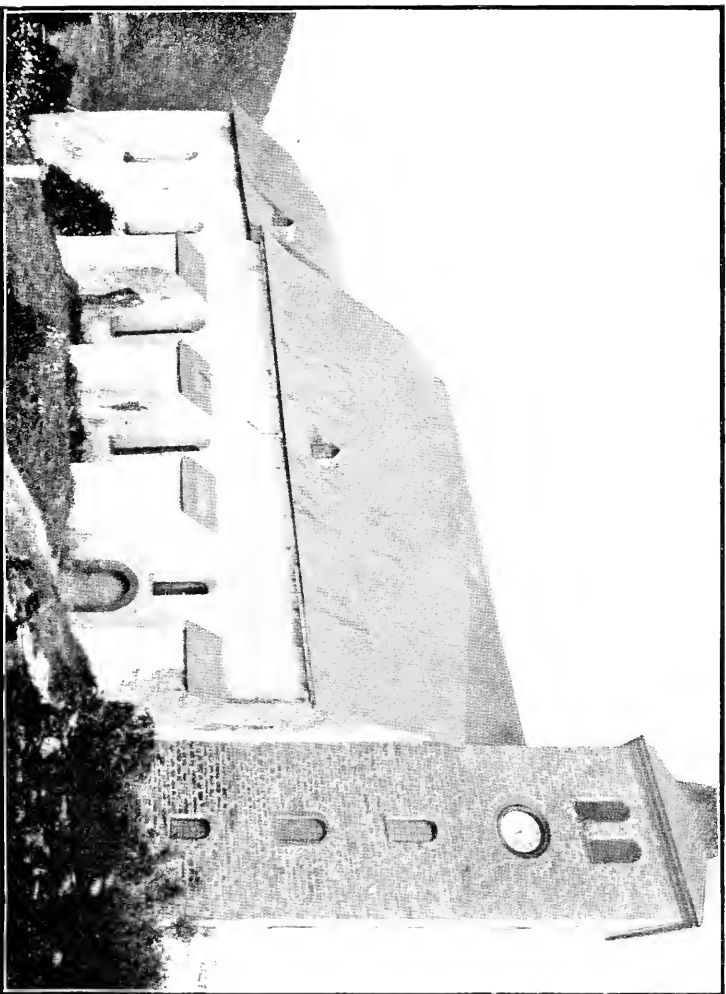
A drive of about twelve miles from Berleburg over the excellent roads of the German Empire through a well-cultivated and well-watered country takes the traveler first past extensive slate quarries, then through quaint little villages peopled by the peasants who toil in the fertile valley of the Eder, and after passing several toll gates finally climbs the mountains from the top of which Elsoff, a village of six hundred inhabitants, may be seen nestling in the heart of the surrounding hills. The view from the top of the ridge before descending the mountains to reach the village by a road which almost returns upon itself to make the descent

discloses a collection of about a hundred houses closely grouped with the handsome school house on a high point on the further side of the village and the spire of the church gracefully rising in the background constituting a most attractive and beautiful picture.

The old church with the spire at one end and a recessed chancel at the other is supposed to date, at least in some of its parts, from about the year 1000. The form of the chancel clearly indicates that it existed in pre-Reformation times. In other respects the form and furnishings of the church are not different from those of our Reformed churches except for the presence of two candles on the altar. A stone in the middle of the aisle near the entrance to the sanctuary marks the grave of a former pastor of the church who died in 1669. The churchyard surrounding the church building is well filled with graves, most of them unmarked, and of the few stones, as far as observed, none record a death earlier than 1849. On one side of the churchyard is the recently constructed parsonage where Pastor Langhoff and his hospitable wife, extended the writer a most warm welcome in a charming home replete with every evidence of comfort and refinement.

The most interesting feature in connection with the church, of course, was the official records of baptisms, marriages, and burials. These as well as the account books of the church have been preserved complete from 1649 and are in the possession of the pastor.

The early books, as might be expected, are well worn and the ink has turned brown and as the



THE CHURCH.



entries are in German script not always easily legible and are arranged in chronological order without any index their examination is not easy. It was, therefore, with much satisfaction that without a very long search the following record was found of the baptism of John, the eldest brother, who was the father of Governor Joseph Hiester :

Elsoff den 8. Januar ao. 1708 hat Johann Jost Hüster Anna Katharina Eheleut ein Söhnlein taufen lassen. Dessen Gevattern sind gewesen Johannes Closs, der Mutter lediger Bruder und Anna Barbara, Jost Hüster's chl. Tochter. Das Kind is Johannes genannt worden.

—which translated is as follows :

Elsoff, the 8th of January, 1708, John Jost Hüster—Anna Katharine, married people, had a son baptized whose sponsors were John Closs, the mother's single brother, and Barbara, Jost Hüster's lawful daughter. The child was named John.

The entry is interesting as giving the maiden name of the ancestor's wife.

Later followed the record of the baptism of other children as follows, the last being the grandfather of the writer's grandfather :

Elsoff den 12. Mai ao. 1709 hat Johannes Hüster Katharina Eheleut zwei Kinder, Zwillinge, ein Mägdlein und ein Söhnlein taufen lassen. Das Mägdlein ist Anna Gerdraut genannt worden und der Bub Johann Daniel.

Elsoff \* \* \* Mai ao. 1710 hat Johannes Hüster und Anna Katharina Elizabeth Eheleut ein Söhnlein taufen lassen \* \* \* Das Kind ist Johann Jost genannt worden.

Elsoff den 1. Marz ao. 1711 hat Jost Hüster Katharina Eheleut einen junger Sohn taufen lassen. Das Kind is Matheus genannt worden.

Elsoff den 7. Februar ao. 1712 hat Jost Hüster Anna Katharina Eheleut ein Töchterlein taufen lassen \* \* \* Das Kind ist Anna Katharina genannt worden

Elsoff den 7. Januar ao. 1713 hat Johannes Hüster und Anna Katharina Eheleut einen Söhnleín taufen lassen. Dessen Gevatter ist gewesen Johannes Daniel, der Mutter noch lediger Gesell. Das Kind ist Johannes Daniel genannt worden.

—which translated are as follows :

Elsoff, 12 May, 1709, John Hüster—Katharine, married people, had two children, twins, a young son and a young daughter, baptized, the girl was named Anna Gertrude and the boy John Daniel.

Elsoff. \* \* \* May, 1710, John Hüster and Anna Katharine Elizabeth, married people, had a son baptized. The child was named John Jost.

Elsoff, 1 March, 1711, Jost Hüster—Katharine, married people, had a young son baptized. The child was named Matthew.

Elsoff, 7 February, 1712, Jost Hüster—Anna Katharine, married people, had a young daughter baptized. The child was named Anna Katharine.

Elsoff, 7 January, 1713, John Hüster and Anna Katharine, married people, had a young son baptized whose sponsor was John Daniel, the mother's single brother. The child was named John Daniel.

It will be observed that the original spelling of the name was Hüster, the "u" having an umlaut. As the umlaut could not be preserved in English and "u" without the umlaut would be differently pronounced it seemed expedient to the early members of the family in America to change the spelling to the present form in order as nearly as possible to preserve the original pronunciation.

Elsoff appears to have had its beginning upon a highway which was laid out along the banks of a stream about eight or ten feet wide. This stream therefore now winds through the centre of the town and the road on its banks crossing from one side to the other is the main street. The streets, of varying



widths and devious courses, average not more than twenty feet in width. They are usually paved with irregular stones, have no sidewalks, and are lined on either side by the houses, barns, yards, and out-buildings of the inhabitants who are chiefly occupied in tilling the neighboring fields. The houses are built by first erecting a framework of timbers a foot or two feet apart and filling in the spaces between them with bricks of various kinds so that the timbers are visible on the sides of the house. The furniture of the houses is of the plainest character and except a clock which is usually found in the living room there is little comfort or luxury. Along the cross timber over the doorway is generally an inscription often running across the entire front of the house and giving the date of the building, the name of the owner, and sometimes a text or pious and reverential expression. On one of the houses following the inscription appears:

Durch Gottes hilfe erbaut von Johannes Jacob Hüster und Christina, seine Ehefrau, und von auch Johannes Jacob Kuhn und Dorothea, dessen Ehefrau, aufgerichtet 25. Mai, 1810.

—which translated is as follows:

Built through the help of God by John Jacob Hüster and Christina, his wife, and also by John Jacob Kuhn and Dorothea, his wife. Erected 25 May, 1810.

The house is at present occupied by Jacob Hüster Vökels, a descendant of one of the builders, with his wife and family.\*

\* Mr. Vökels has in his possession a letter written to one of his family in 1839 by John Hiester, a grandson of Joseph, the second brother, from Bern Township. A portion of the letter including the signature is missing. The letter is interesting both because of its age

In another part of Elsoff standing about fifty feet back from the street is a house which forms with its barn and other buildings a court and which is said to have long been known as the Hüster homestead and to have been occupied by the family until 1834. The property now belongs to and is occupied by a man of the name of Althouse who married a woman named Marburger, whose mother was a Hüster. The barn by its date

as well as because of the account which it gives of contemporary events and conditions. A translation of as much of it as remains is here given :

BERN TOWNSHIP, BERKS CO.,  
STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA,  
August 14, 1839.

DEAR COUSIN :

I received your letter of August 6, 1838 on October 20, 1838, and read it with pleasure because it came to me from an unknown cousin. The day on which I received your letter was one of much pleasure to me because Mr. Joseph Betzel and Ludwig Betzel came from Montgomery County, thirty miles from here. They stayed all night. They gave me much information. They read and explained to me a letter from their father.

In order, cousin, to meet your desire for information there were three brothers who came to America between the years 1730 and 1737. So much I know. The oldest, John Hiester, was the father of Governor Joseph Hiester. Governor Joseph Hiester left a son John. The others were daughters. The Governor's son had two sons, one Frederick Augustus lives still near the town of Reading. The eldest Joseph lives over a hundred miles from his father's place. My grandfather, Joseph Hiester, left five sons. My father John the first born had six sons, William the first died November 4, 1829; I, John am the second and am not married; Daniel the third also is not married; Joseph, the fourth, married and his family consists of one son, John Christian; the fifth, with whom I lived in grandfather's house, has a family consisting of one son and four daughters; Jacob the youngest of the family is married and has a son. We have divided our father's land. My sister Elizabeth is married to Jacob Gitting and her family consists of five children, three sons and two daughters, all of whom are married. My sister Catharine was married to David Bohn who has been dead for a long time. They had five children, four sons and one daughter. There is still one of my father's sisters living, Elizabeth. She is now the only one of the second Hiester who settled in America. She married Jacob Van Reed, who died January 11, 1839. He was 82 years 9 months and 26 days old which is a great age for this time. Of the other Hiester named Daniel I will not speak this time. In my last letter I said as much about him as I wished.

appears to have been built in 1718 and the present house in 1792 but neither bears the name of the builder. In the possession of Mr. and Mrs. Alt-house, however, is an ancient Hüster family Bible. This book is an immense volume containing in German the Old and New Testament and the Apocrypha and was printed in Frankfort in 1699. The family record was kept on the fly-leaves at the beginning of the volume. Most unfortunately the

In your other letter you said you wished to see Mr. Muhlenberg and to speak as a friend and relative of the Muhlenbergs. His wife is the youngest daughter of Governor Joseph Hiester, who was the son of John Hiester, who about 100 years ago came from Elsoff. I told you that you should make yourself known to him by writing a letter to Vienna and inviting him to visit you. Do it now before he comes back to America. It will perhaps not be unwelcome to him as I think his wife would be glad to see her grandfather's birthplace. She thinks much of the Hiester family. He is highly regarded wherever he is known. If you should write, the address is Mr. Henry Augustus Muhlenberg, North American Minister, in Vienna, Austria. If he comes to Elsoff then I should think one or the other of your children could easily come to America. I have spoken to John S. Hiester, son of Governor Joseph Hiester about a position. He said if they are accustomed to work they could get a position either with his son or other friends.

To travel far over land or sea is unknown to me. New York is the chief city in the State of New York, Philadelphia in Pennsylvania, Baltimore in Maryland.

Last summer was very dry. The winter crops were pretty good. Wheat, rye and barley are not much grown in our neighborhood. Last summer oats were only fairly good. The dry weather hurt them. Corn and buckwheat only a half crop. Potatoes also not more. Crab apples were very few.

Last October we had the usual election for Governor in Pennsylvania. The democratic candidate had 127,821 votes. The Federal Bank candidate, Joseph Ritner had 122,325. Majority for Porter 5,496. The old President Andrew Jackson is for the time being well. Our present President Martin Van Buren is highly esteemed. Our Vice-President, Richard M. Johnson was an esteemed officer of the last war with the English and Indians.

On January 26 there was a very heavy storm. The waters were very high and much damage was done. The Schuylkill flows past Reading towards Philadelphia; there is a canal from Reading to Philadelphia and a railroad. We live four miles from the Schuylkill and one mile from Tulpehocken Creek. These two streams were high and did much damage and the bridges were much injured.

first of these fly-leaves containing the record has been completely torn out with the exception of a narrow margin ranging in width from a half inch to an inch along the length of the page. On the margin the last word or two of each line of the original writing can be seen and about half way down the page appears the word "America" which formed the ending of a line at that point. The second page of the record is intact and begins in 1785 with the family record of John Jost Hüster and Christina, his wife. It may very probably be conjectured that this collection of buildings was the original homestead or "Stammhaus" as the Elsoff people call it and that the Bible contains the record kept by the father of the three brothers who emigrated to America and whose departure was noted on these pages.

The community dwelling in Elsoff is evidently a typical farming community of Germany composed of industrious, thrifty, and hardy people. Although there seem to be no wealthy persons among them, there are, as the pastor declares, no poor and some are reputed to have accumulated considerable property. Many of their names, such as Marburger, Althouse, Zacharias, Schaeffer, Gast, and others have a familiar sound to a resident of Berks County and the sign of Louis Kraemer looms up prominently over a place of business. Their German is full of expressions which suggest Pennsylvania German idioms. Taken all in all, the traveler who finds himself transported to a remote hamlet across the Atlantic whence his ancestors removed nearly two centuries ago has novel sensations as he walks among the mountains and along the streams and

even in the very buildings where they lived and worked and worshipped and hears the present dwellers there, some of whom are undoubtedly his kindred, using the same dialect and calling their acquaintances by the same family names which from his birth he has been accustomed to hear in his western world.

From an historical point of view a visit to Elsoff is most valuable and edifying. The lapse of two centuries has made little change and the visitor gains an impression of the appearance and conditions of the place as they existed in detail when the Hiester brothers emigrated. The situation and size of the little town, the character, location, and number of buildings, the furniture of the houses, the dress, language, and occupation of the inhabitants, are exhibited as they were in those days. The scenes from which the early emigrants departed to try their fortunes and bear their part in the building up of the new country are really present to the eye of the modern traveler. The new country to which the emigrants came in the course of its development has been so changed from the state in which they found it that imagination only can paint it but the town which they left stands to-day as it stood then, a finished picture of that era untouched by the energy of modern life.

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